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ABSTRACT

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Chapter Thirty

Affiliation in the Workplace: Career Counselors and Organizations

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Summary

In this paper the authors build on the evolving relationship between individuals and organizations, and the evolving practice of career development to explore opportunities and challenges in the future. The paper suggests that a two-way relationship of affiliation will be needed in the future between organizations and individuals to maximize organizational value creation and individual fulfillment. The career development profession can play a pivotal role in building this relationship. While the evolution of the career development field reflects the emergence of greater individual choice about employment options, today we find ourselves at a crossroads. On the one hand the need for organizational career development services is growing. On the other hand the deployment of such services is sporadic. This paper explores why this is so and provides suggestions for enhancing the relevance of the career development profession in an organizational setting.

Introduction

Major shifts occurring in the world of work today are significantly altering the relationship between individuals and organizations. These changes are driven by individual, social and demographic factors, in addition to the profound impact of an era characterized by corporate scandal and rampant downsizing. There is a growing emphasis on individual control and responsibility in career decision-making. As organizations begin to feel the pressure of an impending labor shortage there is a need to build a strong, mutual relationship of affiliation to both enhance organizational productivity and individual fulfillment. By affiliation we mean a two-way relationship of mutual connection between the organization and the individual. It is defined as becoming closely connected or associated, being derived from a Medieval Latin word meaning to adopt. This presents a significant opportunity for career development professionals to expand their contributions in an organizational setting. However, strong bridges need to be built between the career development profession

and the organizational world. In this paper we explore changes that are occurring in the workplace, we address the importance of building a two-way relationship of affiliation between individuals and organizations, and we examine the implications for the career development field.

Historical Perspective

A historical perspective on the evolving relationship of individuals to organizations and the balance of power between the two provides a context for understanding today's environment and considering future implications. While developing nations, including the U.S., were building a strong industrial base in the late 1800s, one third of the U.S. workforce was self-employed largely as farmers, working conditions were severe and child labor was common (International Survey Research, 2000). While much progress was made by the early 1900s in limiting child labor and the length of the workweek, safety was viewed as an employee responsibility; there was no minimum wage and little job security. At that time people were employed as indentured servants with little control over their conditions of work.

Industrialization and centralization of industries in the U.S. from 1900 to 1930 brought people from farms and immigrants primarily from European countries to urban centers. Many were poor and disconnected from their support systems. Management styles were coercive and authoritarian. Only the physiological needs of the workers were fulfilled. Both personal control and affiliation were restrained.

Career development as a field began to emerge at this time. During this period we saw the development of assessment-based processes such as Parson's trait and factor approach, the Strong Vocational Interest Blank and Hull's Aptitude Test Battery. These assessments represented the first recognition of the importance of blending individual interests and organizational needs in an organizational setting. However, integration of assessments into a context of individual development was yet to come.

Both the Great Depression with its economic decline, and WWII with its loss of lives, significantly reinforced workers' need for security and safety, curtailing personal control, from 1930 to 1950. However, the federal government advanced the career development field and, by extension, personal control by passing legislation that supported social security, designing programs to generate jobs and training for millions of displaced workers, creating the US Employment Service which produced the Dictionary of Occupational Titles and passing the George Dean Act which supported the national vocational education movement.

At the same time we saw advances in the counseling field that recognized the primacy of individual choice, later to become a cornerstone of career

counseling. In the 1940s, Carl Rogers's work introduced a client-centered approach to counseling built on the concept of mutual respect and helping individuals integrate various aspects of themselves in determining their own destiny. This coincided with individuals' contributions in a work setting beginning to extend beyond the purely physical, to the exercise of imagination, creativity and intellectual capability.

From 1950 to 1980, many societal influences contributed to further shifts in the individual/organization relationship. Reconstruction and the growing importance of large companies after WWII, the growth of higher education and the civil rights and the women's movement all were significant influencing factors. Management practices reflected a paternalistic view of organizations supporting individuals in return for fealty. Personal control was enhanced through individual achievement although still defined externally by the organization. Where career development began to emerge as a fledgling discipline in organizations it was focused on organizational goals and performance. We also saw the emergence of theoretical career development frameworks such as those from Super and Holland.

From 1980-2000, the growth rate of the workforce slowed in the U.S. and many developed nations, new computing and Internet technologies emerged, global competition became a reality, and the transition of the U.S. economy from a manufacturing to an information and service base proceeded in earnest resulting in restructuring and the downsizing of organizations. Substantial labor shortages emerged at the end of the 1990s in sectors such as high technology. Individuals were now expected to take charge of their own careers enabled by technology, captured by the concept of career self-reliance (Waterman, 1994). Much organizational energy was expended in supporting individuals affected by corporate downsizing. Some initiatives were born to support individuals in their development within organizations, although these initiatives were often later challenged by resource reductions and waning organizational support.

The Relationship Between Individuals and Organizations

Today we are confronted with a dilemma when considering career development resources in organizations. As career counselors we accept as an article of faith that supporting people in finding better alignment of who they are with their work will increase their fulfillment and their impact on an organization. We have much anecdotal evidence to support this. However, managers and leaders need more tangible evidence of the organizational impact, remarking often, "Just show me the financial benefits." This is, in truth, difficult to do because of the many complex factors that influence organizational performance. One study (Elsdon,

2003) has shown that the return on an investment in career development resources can exceed 180%, but such studies are limited. Given the lack of measurement of impact it is not surprising that even the terminology "career development" is sometimes viewed with suspicion in companies, connoting an area that benefits individuals but does little for the organization. In this climate it is not surprising that some organizational career development programs have struggled to demonstrate their legitimacy and been eliminated or greatly curtailed. Why should we expect the future to be any different from the past?

There are three fundamental factors converging that will require a shift in organizational leaders' views about career development. These factors are as follows:

- Declining growth rate of the labor force in developed nations, including the U.S.
- Decreased commitment of individuals to organizations
- Value creation being increasingly about people

Let us examine each in turn. The annual growth rate of the U.S. workforce increased from about 1% in the 1950s to about 2.5% by the late 1970s/early 1980s. It has been declining ever since to about 1% currently. It is projected to further decline to zero growth over the next 25 years. The scarcity of people that we felt in the late 1990s and early 2000s will return. In this respect the healthcare sector is a leading indicator for our broader economy in the future, with the growth of many organizations in the healthcare sector constrained today by lack of people. An additional factor will come into play as the economy recovers—the accelerated departure from full-time employment of many baby boomers. In many cases they are still in full-time employment because their retirement savings were eroded by the stock market collapse. This will change with economic recovery.

The second factor, the decreased sense of commitment of individuals to organizations, is brought about by continued downsizings and by the different perspectives about the nature of work by the generation entering the workforce. Here is a comment in 2002 from a threaded e-mail by an ex-employee after a dot.com failure: "You may now only borrow 40 hours of my life a week – that's all I'm gonna give." It captures that erosion of commitment that has occurred for individuals, and it is no less on the organization side.

The third factor is that in an information and service- based economy, value creation is increasingly about people. Work is becoming more complex, requiring more advanced functional and interpersonal skills, through personal control, that build with time in an organization. These developed skills are at the core of organizational value creation.

The three factors are converging and they will result in a continued re-balancing of power between individuals and organizations, with more control moving to the individual. This, in turn, means that organizations will need to re-define the relationship with individuals. Indicators of the nature of this redefinition come from listening to people within organizations. Benchmark data (Elsdon, 2003) shows that lack of career development support is a primary issue for individuals. So organizations in the future will need to address individual development, giving it at least equal weight to performance, the traditional focus. Indeed addressing development will result in longer-term performance improvement.

The nature of the relationship with individuals will need to move away from a one-way relationship of retention, something the organization does to the individual, to a two-way relationship of affiliation, a mutual partnership. Affiliation is built on the principles of understanding individual needs, providing people with options and choices, fostering learning, developing personal control, supporting breadth in development, and incorporating Peter Drucker's idea that we engage individuals as volunteers. The strength of affiliation influences not only the decision a person makes to stay with or leave an organization, it also influences the decision to return and most importantly the extent to which people can achieve their full potential. A survey conducted in 2003 showed that on average people were operating at about 60% of their self-assessed, full potential. Closing three quarters of the gap between actual and potential could contribute over $200 million each year for an organization of 15,000 people. Even a skeptical Chief Financial Office will recognize the importance of such a contribution. It is here that we can have a major impact as career development professionals.

Current Perspectives on Career Development in Organizations

Although there exists a unique opportunity for career development professionals to influence affiliation in the workplace, it is unclear to what extent this is currently happening. In an attempt to spark discussion amongst the career development community, the authors organized a series of roundtable discussions (held at the Northern California chapter of the California Career Development Association quarterly meeting and at John F. Kennedy University's Career Development Summer Institute program) about how we as career development professionals can work at the strategic level to create development processes that contribute to individual fulfillment and organizational prosperity. Over 100 Human Resource representatives and career development professionals came together to discuss pressing organizational issues, workforce development initiatives, and the role career development professionals can play in these

initiatives.

As a result of these discussions we learned that while many organizational leaders recognize the importance of creating strategic, integrated systems for developing workforce talent, a major challenge to the sustainability of such processes has been a lack of several factors: effective measurement, effective communication of value contribution, and a clear linkage of development processes to financial contribution and organizational initiatives. Primary areas of organizational interest include succession planning, and leadership and high potential employee development. In many cases the responsibility for development of individual contributors falls predominantly to managers who often lack the needed interpersonal, leadership and employee development skills. Some organizations have created training programs to prepare managers to hold development discussions with employees but few indicated that more comprehensive career development-related initiatives were in place and effective.

Many Human Resource and career development professionals agreed that the term "career development," justified or not, is seen as focused on the individual, and not necessarily tied to organizational strategic initiatives. In an era emphasizing immediate financial returns, the value of workforce development services must be clearly demonstrated and this has not traditionally been the case with career development initiatives. Indeed, when organizations do focus on creating development programs it is to Human Resource or Organizational Development professionals that they generally turn, not career development professionals. It seems that the very term 'career' is questioned, connoting a service that, while it may benefit individuals, does not impact the organizational bottom line.

This lays bare a key challenge for career development professionals in the future. In order to contribute at a strategic level career development professionals must use and expand upon their skills to become organizational change activists, building on a keen understanding of changing concepts of work to support organizations in adapting to new workforce challenges. System-wide development processes are needed to address an employee population that is increasingly feeling disconnected. Such development processes must include a clear demonstration of their contribution to organizational value. Process design, development and project management skills, coupled with business acumen, will be needed to complement traditional career development skills of facilitation, listening, training and coaching with individuals. The career development professional of the future will need to relate the relevance of his or her work with individuals to its organizational impact, and be able to communicate this relevance.

For the profession, this will likely mean sponsoring research that builds a stronger content base relevant to practice in an organizational setting. This

is a content base that further enhances the effectiveness and demonstrated ability of career development practices to increase individual fulfillment, organization value creation and broader community strength. As such it reinforces the research aspect of the practice, training and research triad identified by Walz (1998).

Path Forward and Conclusions

Today we are faced with the convergence of a declining workforce growth rate, decreased commitment of individuals to organizations and organizational value becoming increasingly dependent upon those individuals. Career development professionals have a unique opportunity to partner with organizations to create development systems that build affiliation and increase organizational value while enhancing individual fulfillment. Today career development professionals are not the primary engines of such transformation.

What can be done to strengthen the influence of the career development profession in organizations? First, the responsibility for heightening the awareness of the potential contribution of the profession lies with career development practitioners. We, as career development practitioners, need to facilitate a dialogue among those in organizations with an interest in innovative development practices to understand emerging needs, explore alternative approaches, brainstorm ideas and create strategies for moving forward. We need to increase the content depth of the profession by sponsoring research that enhances our capability to support individuals in their search for greater personal fulfillment and understanding the impact of this on organizations. We must link career development to leadership development initiatives already in place in many organizations. Further, we must link career development to organizational priorities through effective measurement practices that demonstrate tangible benefits. Most importantly, we must communicate solutions and strategies using the language of business to gain credibility.

In our role as career development professionals we are at the heart of the relationship between the individual, the organization and the community. Building on a substantive body of knowledge we can support individuals, organizations and their leaders in creating organizational environments that embrace individual development leading to enhanced individual fulfillment and organizational value creation for the benefit of all.

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